

LEARNING FIRST ALLIANCE

Working Together

to Improve Student Learning

A Report on State

Learning First Alliances

August, 2001



Creation of the National Learning First Alliance

Four years ago, twelve leading national educational organizations came together to form the Learning First Alliance, a permanent, self-initiated coalition dedicated to pursuing a common agenda to improve American public education. We realized that by working together and speaking on critical issues with a unified voice we could significantly improve public schooling.

The Alliance is premised on the belief that education associations and leaders must take responsibility for uniting the key players in the education field, focusing attention, pooling expertise, and crafting comprehensive and effective approaches to solving the many challenges that students, parents and educators face.

Members

American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
American Association of School Administrators
American Federation of Teachers
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
Council of Chief State School Officers
Education Commission of the States
National Association of Elementary School Principals
National Association of Secondary School Principals
National Association of State Boards of Education
National Education Association
National Parent Teacher Association
National School Boards Association

What We Do: Goals and Activities

The Learning First Alliance focuses our members on the essential issues of improving student achievement and facilitates collective and aligned efforts by our leadership, staff, state affiliates, and members towards education improvement.

THE ALLIANCE'S CORE GOALS ARE:

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- to ensure that high academic standards are held for all students;
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- to guarantee a safe and supportive place of learning for all students;
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- to engage parents and other community members in helping students achieve high expectations.
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As we develop research-based consensus documents and tools on these key issues, we use these new ways of working together to disseminate, build support for, and implement our recommendations.



Why State Learning First Alliances?

The national Learning First Alliance has taken an important first step by initiating a permanent partnership to improve student achievement. However, even more important are action-oriented, goal-driven collaboratives of state education associations and leaders that can advance our common agenda and provide new models of how associations and organizations within a state can work together.

A little over one year ago, the national Learning First Alliance extended an offer to pilot partnerships with up to five states interested in forming new, or strengthening existing, state alliances.

Interested states were asked to show that they would:

- Have the commitment and capacity among the state education associations and organizations to create a new or strengthen an existing alliance;
- Have goals consistent with the Learning First Alliance agenda and the commitment of the education community to collaborate in achieving those goals;
- Be open to affiliate representatives of the 12 Learning First Alliance organizations;
- Primarily focus on proactive, collaborative work to improve student achievement, rather than be driven by political or legislative agendas.



Progress of Pilot State Alliances

Each state alliance is a partnership, united behind a clear yet evolving vision of how best to improve public education. Members include state leaders of the 12 Alliance member organizations, plus additional state groups that are dedicated to bettering public schooling and that believe in the power of alliance. The national and state alliances base our work on the belief that:

- Good working relationships across stakeholders in the public education enterprise are essential to improve student learning;
- By working together, education organizations and leaders can address system problems and remove—rather than perpetuate—barriers to improved student learning;
- Collaboration requires more than conversations, no matter how constructive. It must lead to action, permeate our organizations' activities, and become an integral element of our daily work.

The ultimate goal of our collaboration is to improve teaching and learning in America's public schools and classrooms.

Each pilot state alliance has taken a different pathway toward collaboration to improve student achievement. Their stories follow:

Kansas

Kansas Learning First Alliance

The Kansas Learning First Alliance has declared “making Kansas first in the nation in teaching and learning” its guiding vision, and has made the national Alliance’s core goals theirs. On this foundation, the Kansas Alliance has developed a powerful consensus voice to address critical issues in Kansas. Using the national Alliance’s work in reading as a springboard, it has issued position papers, held a state summit on reading, and provided workshops for educators throughout the state. With support from the E.M. Kauffman Foundation, it has distributed the national Alliance reading action plan and associated Kansas documents to every K-3 teacher and principal in the state.

The Kansas Alliance also has successfully collaborated with the State Board of Education to increase funding for professional development and is working with legislative leaders on a bill to institute improved reading programs in low-performing schools. Recognizing the centrality of engaging the public to support public education, the Kansas Alliance has also launched a series of public conversations on the role of public education, modeled on conversations developed by the Public Agenda Foundation.

The Kansas Alliance’s plans for the future include:

- **Public Engagement:** expanding public conversations on the role of public education as well as targeting discussions on what it will take to improve student literacy;

- **Mathematics:** widely distributing and using the national Alliance’s mathematics action plan and then conducting a review of mathematics teaching and learning in Kansas to determine strategies for improving student mathematics achievement;

- **Professional Development:** working with their members and state policy makers to make the case that investing in high quality professional development pays off in student achievement;

- **Evaluation:** examining how their work is successfully affecting teaching and learning.

Kansas Alliance members believe that by creating a collaboration with clear student achievement goals at its core, they are stronger together than they would be independently.

“Through the Alliance,” says one state leader, “we can take on projects a single organization could not handle alone, and, by speaking as a unified voice, we can have a much more potent influence on the direction of public discussion on education.”

“Through Kansas Learning First Alliance, we can talk in common terms beyond the boundaries of our own organizations. We’ve built relationships even among people who may have been adversaries before.”—KLFA member



Illinois

Illinois Learning Partnership

Believing that school reform is more likely to take place if they pool their expertise, 20 state education associations and agencies created the Illinois Learning Partnership in 1996. The partnership focuses on identifying and removing systemic barriers to educational improvement. As stated in the partnership's covenant, "*as catalysts of change, the partners will endeavor to alter the present culture of isolation and contention in education, fostering collaborative improvement efforts. As subjects of change, the partners will listen to and learn from one another and their various constituencies, improving the ways they relate and function.*"

The Illinois Learning Partnership has developed a framework for learning around three key elements: collaborative culture, effective practices in teaching and learning, and use of data. For Illinois Learning Partnership, the collaborative culture extends beyond the conference room to school districts, schools, and the community at large. Through Learning Networks, the Partnership trains district leadership teams and site leadership teams to help them make decisions collaboratively, effectively utilize data, and use effective practices in teaching and learning. In the words of one member of the Illinois Learning Partnership, "everyone has a piece of the puzzle." Thus, at every level, there must be col-

lective ownership of, and therefore responsibility for, both the problems and the solutions.

In 2000, the Illinois Learning Partnership accepted an invitation to partner with the national Learning First Alliance. Helping partners tackle "difficult issues" through conversations that can lead to collaborative actions is central to the mission of the Illinois Learning Partnership. With the national Alliance as a facilitator and "critical friend," the Partnership plans to convene a series of conversations to explore what education organizations can do to help district-level leaders turn around student achievement in low-performing, high-poverty schools. This work will be coupled with an expansion of the number of districts the Partnership is assisting.

"Illinois Learning Partnership and its organizations can help districts as they move through the change process. Each organization can provide a scaffold to our members. Each of us can say the same thing. We can make sure that everyone is in the room talking together. This will help promote the culture of collaboration essential to improving education."
—Illinois Learning Partnership member

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Ohio Learning First Alliance

The Ohio Learning First Alliance emerged just this spring as a partnership committed to *actively* assisting Ohio's public schools in improving student achievement by striving toward the three major goals of the national Alliance (high academic standards, safe and supportive schools, and public engagement).

Ohio's legislature recently passed Academic Standards for Language Arts and Mathematics, and the Ohio Alliance lost no time in seizing this opportunity to make a difference in schools. Immediately, they vowed to send a "loud and clear message to our members that we fully support implementation of high academic standards. These standards will help children." The Ohio Alliance is already planning a formal statement on their commitment to these standards.

Moving beyond statements, the Ohio Learning First Alliance, in collaboration with the Ohio Department of Education and with support from the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation, is also launching an effort to help districts align curriculum and instruction with the new state Language Arts and Mathematics Standards, and to build parent and community support to help students meet these standards.

They will develop tools and meetings aimed at helping Alliance members know:

- How to work in their own districts in aligning curriculum, assessment, instruction, and professional development so all students achieve the standards;
- How to build "political will" to achieve standards in their districts.

In November, 2001 the Ohio Alliance will hold a "First Response" Institute at which 12 low-performing Ohio school districts will have the opportunity for in-depth learning with state and national experts on best practices in implementing the new standards. Alliance members will then continue to work with these 12 districts to support their efforts, as well as evaluate their progress so the districts can later serve as models for others. Moreover, expanding beyond these 12 districts, Ohio regional education service centers will participate in the Institute—and then serve as mentors to other districts beginning standards implementation.

Washington Learning First Alliance

Washington is the newest of our pilot alliances, but they have already convened several meetings of major education stakeholders, and plan to create a Learning First Alliance in Washington. Although Washington state has had a number of education coalitions over the years, state leaders of education associations and organizations believe that an alliance modeled on the national Learning First Alliance will help sustain the vision of education reform and increase student learning.



Bringing

How Does the National Learning First Alliance Support State Alliances?



LEARNING FIRST ALLIANCE

First and foremost, the national Alliance serves as a convener and facilitator: we help bring everyone to the table, facilitate meetings, and provide a neutral sounding board. The national Alliance's over-arching goals around student achievement and its research-based materials provide a common focus and vision.

Once the state makes the decision to form an alliance, we provide ongoing support from national education leaders, expertise from national organizations, and our own research and publications. We function as the connector between the states and these national resources, bringing state alliances together in an informal network to learn from each other, from their national Alliance counterparts, and from national experts in areas of common concern.

We also provide visible, national support for the state alliances—highlighting their efforts in national meetings and publications—and helping them secure funding and other support from various national and philanthropic organizations. Most of all, the national Alliance serves as a “critical friend” to states throughout their Alliance work. We work to stay one step ahead of states' needs so that our core work—on reading and mathematics, on safe and supportive learning communities, on family and community engagement, on taking professional development to scale—reflects the input and meets the needs of our state partners.

Demonstrating the collaborative nature of our work, support for states is provided not only by Alliance staff but also by a State Alliances Work Group comprised of staff members from the 12 national Alliance organizations.

Shared Challenges and Next Steps...

As they have developed, state Alliances have faced similar challenges from state to state—challenges similar to those faced by the national Alliance. How do organizations overcome their initial hesitations and commit to significant work together? How do organizations mobilize and integrate the work so that organizations and their membership, beyond a few committed individuals, are engaged and doing work differently? How can national and state organizations and leaders foster real improvements in districts, schools, and classrooms?

While grappling with these challenges, the national Learning First Alliance and the state alliances remain committed to creating, communicating, and acting upon a vision for improving student achievement that requires change both in their internal organizations and in schools across the country. Forming an alliance does not mean discussing problems collectively, but rather working side-by-side to agree upon and implement solutions.

LEARNING FIRST ALLIANCE

All publications may be downloaded free of charge from www.learningfirst.org. For additional copies of all publications, contact the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development at (800) 933-ASCD (2723) extension 2, or (703) 578-9600.

Publications

Every Child Reading: An Action Plan

This paper expresses the consensus view of principals, teachers, superintendents, PTA's, school boards, teachers colleges, state education commissioners, and the other members of Learning First Alliance regarding some basic principles about how to teach reading. The report calls for an end to the reading wars and a sensible balance between whole language and phonics approaches. It outlines eight steps necessary to ensure the reading success of every child as well as a detailed action plan for making these things happen.

Every Child Reading: A Professional Development Guide

The guide, which follows from *Every Child Reading: An Action Plan*, describes what teachers need to know and be able to do to teach and improve students' reading skills. It includes the conditions that must be in place for teachers to improve reading instruction, eight components of effective, research-based reading instruction in which teachers must have a thorough grounding, and examples of specific professional development experiences that enable teachers to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to teach reading effectively.

Every Child Mathematically Proficient: An Action Plan

This action plan puts forward research-based strategies "to bring American students to world-class levels in mathematics." The paper addresses the growing need for American students to become more proficient in increasingly complex mathematics subjects at earlier ages. To accomplish the report's goals of virtually all students mastering Algebra I and Geometry by the end of ninth grade, the Alliance proposes several action steps, including initiating incentive programs to attract more qualified teachers of mathematics, equipping teachers with skills and support to help children of all backgrounds, and ensuring that all mathematics teachers are licensed and qualified.

Every Child Learning: Safe and Supportive Schools

This report synthesizes the research showing the essential components of safe and supportive learning communities, and presents concrete recommendations for putting these components into place in classrooms, schools, school districts, and states. The report makes the case that while schools must rightly focus their attention on standards and high achievement, they will not be able to meet the goal of increasing student achievement without providing a safe, supportive community in which their students can learn.

Upcoming Work: Effective Professional Practice

- What are keys to success in high-performing school districts?
- How are key actors in the education system—union leaders, superintendents, school board members, teachers, principals, and parents—working together (or not) to create success across the district?

Member organizations of the Learning First Alliance are currently studying several high-performing, high-poverty school districts to uncover how the actions of multiple actors in the education community foster and sometimes hinder school districts' efforts to increase student achievement. Based on this study, analysis of other research, and the experience of our member organizations, by fall 2002 we will issue practical tools and policy recommendations for educators at all levels of the education system.

Learning First Alliance

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The National Alliance's work with state alliances is supported by a generous grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.